

A Thousand Light Years Ago: *Drummer*

by David Hurles, Old Reliable

He haunted the sleazy grind houses on Market Street. Blacks smoked. Mexicans sat singly in blue watchcaps. Unstoppable cocksuckers roamed the balconies. His feet stuck to the floor... He paid to intensify reality in images so big and bright even the blind could see.

— *Some Dance to Remember: A Memoir-Novel of San Francisco 1970-1982*, Jack Fritscher

...On Market Street in dewy San Francisco, from Seventh Street to the magazine store at Powell, as they stand perhaps in the drizzle, fugitive spirits will respond to that now faint message soon to become *drummingly* insistent [italics added]

— *City of Night* (Part Four), John Rechy (1963)

“What a man knows at fifty is incommunicable to a man of twenty,” said Adlai Stevenson. If he had won the 1956 presidential election, the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s would have surely looked different to those who were part of those times. In their recall they are also changed from the times we know we lived through, because we have lived more, and the layers of time change the texture of our recall. We are faithful to those years, knowing they will never come around again, still not quite convinced there were such times. Time toys with us. At twenty a man might think he can see fifty in the distance, but there is no possible way to suspect what lands he will pass through on the way to fifty. Most twenty-year-olds eventually reach fifty, or worse, wondering how they got there so impossibly fast, question both the math and the justice of the situation.

HURLES IN THE CITY, A BOY

I was nineteen the year *City of Night* aroused me with incredible stories I could only hope were true. The next summer, in 1964, *Life* magazine tightened the knot in my stomach with its expose of gay life in the big cities, in San Francisco. Right before my eyes, two pages wide, was a dark

photo of a place called the Tool Box, men in leather silhouetted before a huge wall mural of other men in leather, the work of Chuck Arnett. In the summer of 1965, sharing the drive with a stranger, Ohio vanished in a rear-view mirror. In Berkeley I turned twenty-one. In San Francisco I grew up. In the same summer, Jack Fritscher also arrived at the edge of the world, and became another cell in the rapidly growing body of gay men. Every day there were new arrivals, men who braved the prairies and mountains, in search of a place to call home, to be with their own kind. Untold numbers of sex refugees, of gay immigrants, reached the end of the rainbow with no money, and no one to call. But San Francisco welcomed them all. The earlier arrivals helped provide comfort and sustenance to those who followed. The only agenda was brotherhood and sharing, peace and love.

What followed were fifteen years of sexual freedom, sexual anarchy, sexual invention and redefinition. It was exciting. Corporal Works of Mercy were the order of the day. Practices and relationships heretofore the province of only a few, now exposed to the light of day, attracted and connected men who had at some time thought that they were the “only one.” But for subversive sex to open up, expand, be shared, it needed someone with the loyalty and passion of a monk to search out, record and describe it, write about it, to make it accessible to the uninitiated.

In 1975 I was living in an ancient three-unit building on Clementina Street, south of Market Street, in a cheap apartment directly above Chuck Arnett. Chuck was a gentle soul in a seductive body, directly unashamed of his passion for heavy-duty sex. Although I saw his well-deserved popularity, and heard through the floor boards his remarkable sexual stamina, I wasn't aware, at the time, that Chuck Arnett had created the testosterone generating mural I had seen in *Life* a decade earlier. Industrial artist Jim Sterling lived a few doors away. Photographer Jim Stewart hosted parties (and photo exhibitions) in his flat directly across the street. Creative, sexually intense, hot players increasingly populated the low-rent South of Market area.

The unseen hand of dignified, hypnotic, and enthusiastically brutal sexual buccaneer Jim Stewart instinctively and surely guided me toward his longtime friend, Jack Fritscher. At the time, the young men who were summoned, then seduced, by the pariah pastel city, also assumed the weight and duty of mutual assistance, each looking out for all; in this place, whether it was popular hallucination or something more cosmic, the 1960s continued right on through the better part of the 1970s. Coming to San Francisco was rarely something that was decided upon; it was a necessity, a force, a duty, a blessing, and out of our hands. When Jim Stewart and Jack Fritscher headed west from Michigan, coming to live

together in San Francisco, they left their individual elsewhere's behind them; like me, they came because they had to come.

A TRIBE OF MEN...HORNY MEN

It must have been a similar raw force that led Jim to bring Jack and myself together. It had to be done, and so he did it. I soon appreciated that Jack knew, and was known by, a large and diverse ensemble of people. His interests were courageously wide-ranging, and completely sincere. He was determined to understand all of the pieces of this new cultural puzzle we found ourselves in, and by assembling the many pieces to see what it was that the pieces were working to form. It was a time when free and readily available sex, in infinite variety sometimes anonymous but more often not, defined the day. Sex was everywhere, really and truly everywhere, and you could have as much as you could handle.

In this place and time, Jack was as eager a reveler as everyone, but he was more than a participant in this throbbing crowd scene. With sex everywhere, many people blissfully thought no further than the next, soon to be realized, orgasm. Jack, however, also recognized uncommon, unknown, or "new" variations beyond the traditional man-to-man "naked sweat and grunt," and sensed that these other sexually charged interactions were rich and significant. Jack undertook the weighty task of seeking out often secret and unspoken aspects of manly sexual excess, obsession, and activity; he was driven to make sense of it all, and intellectually willing and able to explain it in a judgmental-free manner, thus opening the doors to other men who needed a little push, or a pull, to open themselves up.

It would be immodest for me to claim that I ever planned to become a student of men, or sex, or human nature. My awareness developed in parallel to my work. I regard my own experiences as the product of having lived a very lucky life. Jack, on the other hand, spent many disciplined years in universities, learning and teaching. In the end, we have each become student and scholar of the same tribe, but with the wonderful advantage of perspective drawn from opposite poles. For both of us, calling became a vocation. As members of a subculture, in a special time and place, we each were provided an opportunity to observe aspects of our own culture and various sub-cultural fringes, from the inside and the outside. We each chose to trust the integrity of the unguided voices of other men who we determined knew the truth, and who would describe the truth to us.

In 1975, *Drummer* was launched in Los Angeles. But before it had time to define itself, find its voice, fate intervened. A gay bar fund-raiser,

tongue in cheek calling itself a “Slave Auction,” was raided by the LAPD who with “straight” face announced that they had acted in the interest of freeing the slaves from their bondage. Among the hundred or so arrested that day was *Drummer* publisher John Embry. Righteously angry, he left Los Angeles as soon as he could, and moved to San Francisco, bringing the promising magazine, and his now fiercely populist political activism with him.

Tucked away in our minds are memories of moments that we can’t even remember forgetting, memories that long ago escaped the bondage of effortless recall, but which come again, bright and loud and full of life, when summoned by a chance sequence of words. Jack, in midnight phone calls that cut through the thick bright white San Francisco night fog, cautiously weighed the opportunities and consequences that might lie ahead. Becoming editor of such a magazine carried with it the potential to be a life-changing event, a county fair midway littered with landmines. Wearing the ringmaster’s top hat would require him to surrender a large measure of personal security, and to commit his reputation to the climate of another season. His decision was never driven by dollars and cents. With a leap of faith, he gambled that he would be afforded the freedom to cultivate Embry’s undeveloped *Drummer* with thoughts heretofore unspoken, opening up for many, the more often than not unseen leather brotherhood—its past and its present—for the future.

A very few erotically exclusive groups had started to find their own voice, most specifically wrestling, which had come together both regionally and nationwide. There was also some action in underwear and water-sports. Jack used *Drummer* to celebrate a multitude of out-of-the-ordinary, unusual, pursuits in the process de-stigmatizing many activities, which opened them up to others who previously may have only dreamed of being included. Jack created a midway where even the most marginal act could have an audience, and everyone could be entertained. Those with some religious or political aversion to cigar-smoking midget Argentinean amputees, or bearded behemoths, or even sleazy, sweaty, tattooed carnies...well, they could either welcome the occasion to widen their outlook, or move on to another booth in this panoramic midway, to continue the pursuit of their own special kewpie doll.

DRUMMER MEETS OLD RELIABLE

In my idiosyncratic manner, I resisted actually meeting Jack face to face, for many months. All the while, however, we engaged in a thought-provoking and wide-ranging telephone conversation that moved forward, several hours each night every night (and that continued for years after

we met). So the time finally came that I met Jack in person, with the quite natural result that our friendship, and our ongoing deliberations, observations, and points of view blossomed. Looking back, I may have appeared to be a greater fount of wisdom than I actually was. Jack, however, was an idea man, and I gave him resonance and reverberation. A favorable consequence of our collaboration was the recurrent appearance of my own modest photographs (and sometimes words) displayed by Jack in *Drummer*, exhibited in manner I might not have considered or dared.

It became clear, once I had finally met Jack face to face, that he had an insatiable interest in what I had done or collected, starting with my earliest work, nude photos and slides taken in 1968. In the intervening eight years or so I had done some Super-8 filming, and for several years I had been making audio recordings of men having sex, or talking about it. Video was still a few years away. The audiotapes were, and remain, enormously significant. They are an oral history of what was still a silent era. The speakers are primarily the disenfranchised, hustlers, ex-cons, outcasts of one sort or another. In an atmosphere absent of pressure, alone and speaking their thoughts out loud, the most startling things were often revealed. Many of the audios continue many stops beyond frightening. My ears perked up! With photos, what started out as random projects started to unify into something entirely different than I had initially foreseen.

To keep this long story short, Jack flattered me, and that encouraged me. Even though I had been working as a photographer since 1968, and was able to provide for myself in this manner, however modestly, I didn't get much respect. If a magazine mentioned me at all, it was almost certain to be in a negative light. Nevertheless, I was eating regularly, and didn't feel a mandate to change my style or the subjects I cared about. By the time I met Jack, I had already been arrested, tailed, subpoenaed, lied to, betrayed, cheated and ignored, and I bore some scar tissue, so to speak. Jack, unlike many others, was enthused by what I showed him. Once he became editor of *Drummer*, he tirelessly promoted my photos and tapes, and on several occasions invited me to contribute an article or review.

I recall Jack bringing his friend Robert Mapplethorpe over to meet me, before he was touched by fame. I was especially delighted when he asked to buy some black-and-white prints of a favorite Old Reliable model, Mongoose. I declined any payment, rewarded instead by the pleasure of sharing the joy these photos obviously brought him.

While Jack may have had to drag me kicking and screaming into the world, I never doubted that I was being dragged, at least, in the right direction.

A “FAGGOT’S” SECRETS ARE TOLD: THE *DRUMMER* SALON

More significantly, having drawn me out into the larger world, I became something of an accomplice, collaborator, and ally. I could time and again recognize in *Drummer* the best moments of our trips, and tricks, and travels in the night. The details weren't offered as gossip, however, but as part of a larger erotic epic, presented without gratuitous first person pronouns, or names. *Drummer* wasn't about Jack, or myself, or his many, many friends and contacts. It was, in fact, a means of leveling the playing field. If I had sex with dangerous, heavily tattooed cigar-smoking ex-cons, who slapped and choked me while calling me “faggot” and threatening me (and more, for a very modest fee), *Drummer* was there to let other guys with the same interest in on the game, judgment free. Not everyone's cup of tea, but somewhere this honest revelation would prompt a lot of other men to blissfully walk around stiff-legged for days on end.

Jack wrote a roman a clef about San Francisco in the 70s called *Some Dance To Remember*, which is in many ways “the *Drummer* novel.” Woven into the intimate, documentary fiction style of the book, are moments and stories from my own life as an avant-garde artist existing near the perilous edge that Jack found suitable to progress the encompassing narrative. I was pleased to recognize aspects of my life, true even when unflattering, reflected back to me from the character of porn mogul, Solly Blue. In *Some Dance*, where things born of truth are retold as fiction, it is a reasonable speculation that *Some Dance's* fictional magazine, *Maneuvers*, opens a window into some true moments and times between the covers of the real *Drummer*. As witness to the actual march of time, and like an Uncle who watched the novel develop even through the awkward years, I confidently suggest that no other book, fiction or nonfiction, not even Armistead Maupin, has sorted out, packaged up, and then delivered back the 70s era of gay, and sexual, liberation in San Francisco, with greater dramatic detail, historic accuracy, or sensitivity for the time itself.

SMOKIN' A J WITH DA' BAD BOYS:
CHRISMAS AT FRITSCHER'S

Memories overflow and fill the room as I recall just a few of our exploits. One Christmas day gathered at Jack's home, I was accompanied by a tall bank robber (a recent pen pal who had written scorching sexual promises), just hours off the Greyhound, paroled from Walla Walla State Pen the prior day. I was very keyed up, eager to commence the blistering encounters pledged in his letters, to submit myself to the frenzied physical aggression,

muscle, and vigor of this strong young man who had been starved of sexual liberty for so long, prepared to stare at his angry face, and face his antisocial rage, focused to burn a hole through my body, ready already, not pleased by delay! In fact, with the presents open around the tree and bread broken, each person at Jack's home was anxious for the sweet desert of a good joint and the familiar embrace of an unfamiliar male body, to meld with one's own, to finalize the holiday with the bliss and ecstasy that holidays would seem to command and deserve. Jack also had plans laid out to celebrate the smells and tastes of the day with another throbbing side of brute. Nevertheless, with a scholar's determination (and maybe some brandy or a joint), he patiently made my bank robber the center of attention, encouraging him to educate us about his area of expertise, about sex behind bars. Happy, fed, and joyful, those assembled finally dispersed into the fog-bound white night to rendezvous with our individual physical, or metaphysical, closure of the day.

On every possible occasion Jack and I went, sometimes with others, to the Golden Gloves, as well as to the pro fights (usually featuring lustrous lightweight Latino hopefuls, all of who looked good enough to eat without washing first), when they still had Friday night fight cards at the Civic Center Auditorium. Greg Varney, a Golden Gloves trainer, explained to us the ins and outs of the teen amateur sluggers, and got us as close as we could get to the worldly wise young brawlers. We would leave sprayed with blood, spit, and sweat; but we left with new schooling, too, plus material for a month's worth of vivid wet dreams. Jack wrote a "Gay Sports" article about boxing for *Drummer* as well as a Golden Gloves article about Varney whom he dubbed "Noodles Romanov." [See *Drummer* 20 (January 1978) and *Drummer* 29 (May 1979).] Much the same dream infusion could be said about the amateur bodybuilding contests that Jack managed to discover and film in out-of-the-way high-school gyms and East Bay Masonic Lodge halls. These were very "straight" affairs loaded with sexual tension, and we were moles, intermingling to observe a hidden culture.

Within my bedroom (and despite the exasperation of his longtime lover David Sparrow) Jack examined the planes and curves of many muscular hustlers, along with the chasms and gorges of their minds. Some were my gift to him; others probably qualified as Research and Development for *Drummer*. I was accustomed to the nuances and signals of my thugs, but Jack dove headfirst into the shallow end with some of the most treacherous and unpredictable brutes, yet always came through with a (sometimes shaky) smile, and having learned and experienced new things.

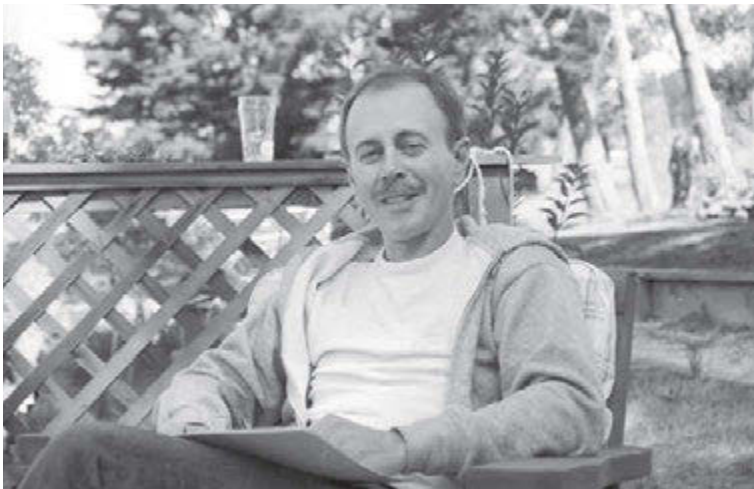
IN THE SWEATY PITS OF THE PEN

If I might look back from perhaps thirty-five years, I will always treasure one particular adventure Jack twisted my hesitant elbow hard enough to convince me I'd be a raging fool to pass up. The occasion was a six-hour tour inside San Quentin, broken up into very small groups, with convicts as our extremely friendly and intimate tour guides. Jack, who knew everybody, knew someone who knew someone who could get us into prison. Included was a basic dinner meal in the main dining hall, convicts, guards, guns and all. To even get in to prison, however, we were required to release the State of California of all liability for our safety, and we were notified that in the event that we were to be taken hostage, we would not be bargained for; a thorough strip search was then required before we could finally pass through the main gate. What a night to remember! The prison system was comparatively peaceful then (and a lot less crowded than it has now become), and nothing was hidden from us...it was an Open House! As we went along, Jack memorized every detail, and with his keen eye he directed my own sight to unwelcoming, but overwhelming, sights I might have otherwise missed. (Actually, he alerted me to quite a number of exceptionally pleasing sights, too, like a convict tongue wagging its way through a small hole in a steel door. Jack observed that we were like French royals touring the Bastille before the Revolution.) We were inside a dream, maybe it was a nightmare, but the cool part was that we got instant parole, so we could leave later that same night, smuggling out with us thousands of mental pictures, sights, smells, and feelings, of heaven and hell, and an ample supply of muscular, sweaty, tattooed, temporarily unavailable miscreants, to recall for a long, long time.

These escapades, and hundreds more, filtered, translated, explained, and celebrated, all found their way into *Drummer* as in Jack's article about our adventure, "Prison Blues." [*Drummer* 21 (March 1978)] As much as the gay popular culture of the period could be examined, explained or codified, it was done in the pages of *Drummer*. It was in those pages that the actual facts of contemporary gay men's lives, and the sexual truth of a sexual time were recorded. *Drummer* was a journal, a guidebook, and an open invitation. Time has shown that the risks Jack took were worth taking, as curious subscribers became committed loyalists, rather than turning away. Jack could thrust directly to the heart of the hardon, and didn't need to be coaxed, either. Sometimes he pushed the magazine defensively ahead of him; other times he stood protectively in front of it, but always he wrote for *Drummer*, and his frequent, unique photographic layouts for *Drummer* filled thought-spaces between his words, right up to the very end, in 1999, of *Drummer*, and yesterday's millennium. *Drummer* was a minute in time for Jack the observer, Jack the teacher, Jack the

sexual adventurer, and, most of all, for Jack the journalist. He ranged far beyond *Drummer*. *Drummer* did not define him. He defined *Drummer*.

David Hurles is the legendary photographer and video artist Old Reliable famous for his trademark street hustlers and ex-cons. In Washington, DC, he began his photographic career with Guild Press in whose defense he testified as both model and photographer in one of the most important obscenity trials of the 1960s. In the post-Stonewall migrations, he moved his low-rent atelier to San Francisco's Tenderloin where like a bohemian painter he cast his romantic manwhores from the streets, the Zee Hotel, and the Old Crow bar. Starting up one of the first gay mail-order companies in 1971, he created a niche for his photographs and erotic audiotapes of verbal abuse by rough trade. In 1976 when he met Jack Fritscher, he was filming in the difficult Super-8 format used by his mentor and longtime friend Bob Mizer of Athletic Model Guild. His homomasculine photographs frightened gay magazine publishers whose rude dismissals caused him to retreat until Fritscher persuaded him that *Drummer* needed him. With photos published as Old Reliable in *Drummer* 20 (January 1978), he was introduced in "Prison Blues" in *Drummer* 21 (March 1978) as an artist—whose personality provided the basis for the fictitious pornographer who steals the show in Fritscher's *Some Dance to Remember: A Memoir-Novel of San Francisco 1970-1982*. He also shot many covers and centerfolds for *Man2Man Quarterly* (1980-1982). Old Reliable, collected by Robert Mapplethorpe and Sam Wagstaff, is a sin-



"David Hurles (Old Reliable)," Fritscher-Hemry House, 1981. Photograph by Jack Fritscher. ©Jack Fritscher

gular eye within American popular culture: thousands of his photographs have appeared in dozens of gay magazines, and his videos have sold more than a million copies. He earned fortunes and lost them and earned them again. In 2005, the artist Rex edited the coffee-table book *Speeding: The Old Reliable Photos of David Hurles*. On October 19, 2007, film director John Waters made a pilgrimage to visit Old Reliable because, John Waters said, Old Reliable was both a “guilty pleasure” and an important influence in his own life and films. Pals with Gore Vidal, David Hurles lives in Hollywood.